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ABSTRACT

Serving as a way to sum up or apply many of the principles students have been studying in a general semantics course, a unit on advertising language is devoted to examining how advertisers select language for its affective and directive uses. The unit shows how language is used to stimulate consumer interest in a product and often to mask the lack of extensionally verifiable information presented about the product. A major feature of the unit is that the students are asked not only to examine existing advertisements but to become advertisers themselves, to create their own advertising copy. In the major written assignment of the unit, students compose and explain an "institutional advertisement" (an ad whose immediate purpose is to favorably dispose the reader toward a company, institution, or organization that sponsors the ad). Coming at the end of a course, the unit usually perks up students who are growing jaded and weary as another long semester of college is drawing to an end. (RS)

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Teaching the Language of Advertising

by
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I'd like to share with you today some ideas and assignments that I use in a unit on advertising language that I include in my course in General Semantics. The unit comes at the end of the course, and incidentally serves as a way of summing up or applying many of the principles that we have been studying. General Semantics is, to define it broadly, the study of the interaction between words, attitudes, and behavior, with the ultimate goal being the avoidance of conflict--or at least the minimizing of the hostilities and misconceptions that can arise when language is used or understood imperfectly or interpereted hastily.

The unit on advertising language is devoted to examining how advertisers select language, particularly for its affective and directive uses, in order both to stimulate consumer interest in a product and, often, to mask the lack of extensionally verifiable, i. e., substantive, information presented about the product. A major feature of the unit is that I ask the students not only to examine existing advertisements but to become advertisers themselves, to create their own advertising copy.

We begin with a reading and discussion of a chapter on

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advertising in our main textbook, S. I. Hayakawa's Language in Thought and Action, which emphasizes how advertisers have appropriated the poet's use of symbols and the various affective devices of language--rhythm, metaphor, connotation, alliteration and assonance, etc. Other assigned readings include "Carl Wrighter's" classic self-expose "Weasel Words," which points out how frequently advertising claims and slogans make the unwary consumer think something is being said that isn't being said at all; David Ogilvy's "How to Write Potent Copy," a compendium of dos and don'ts for copywriters; and Jeffrey Schrank's "The Language of Advertising Claims," which illustrates about a dozen specific and deceptive types of ploys found in the slogans and claims that advertisers use to inform--or more often bamboozle--the consumer.

Activities in connection with these readings are of two types. I ask students to bring to class or insert in their course journals examples of various kinds of headlines, ploys, and claims that they discover in print or on television. I also page through a recent edition of Time or Newsweek, pointing out, for example, how various ads illustrate Ogilvy's dicta about what to include in an effective headline. But I also, very early in the unit, ask students to themselves compose their own headline and body copy. For example, after reading Schrank's piece on advertising ploys, I ask students to invent illustrations of the "water is wet" claim, the scientific claim, the "we're unique" claim, the "incomplete comparison" claim, the "stroking" claim, and others for a hypothetical wart-removing product called

Wartsoff (1). Students are asked to read them aloud as part of our class discussion.

As another exercise I ask students to write a headline and an explanation of that headline for a hypothetical brand of eye makeup for men that I call Macho-Eyes. The students respond to the assignment with clever good humor, and the results they come up with are often not much different from what you might see in any fashion-conscious, mass-circulation magazine; some might even be worthy of a thirty-second spot on Monday Night Football. (If Joe Namath can model pantyhose, surely Frank Gifford could extol the virile virtues of eye makeup for men.) I duplicate all of the students' headlines and distribute them to the class, pointing out how they embody (or fail to do so) the various concepts in our readings. For variety, some semesters I make the product Pritty Litter, a cat litter whose totally irrelevant gimmick is that it comes in six colors (2). This, of course, is what the students must emphasize in their ads, since their readings have pointed out that most brands of a mass-market product are essentially identical in composition and effects, so that it is up to the advertiser to create <u>verbally</u> any supposed qualitative differences. By the way, I had originally used for this assignment a fictitious line of colored contact lenses--so you can change your eye color every day to match your blouse or shirt--but I decided to drop it when such a product actually appeared on the market.

All of these writing and reading assignments serve as a sort of pre-writing activity for the major written assignment in the

unit, in which I ask my students to compose and also explain what is essentially an institutional advertisement, though they usually include features from the hard-sell world of consumer products. An institutional ad is one whose immediate purpose is not to sell a product or service but instead to favorably dispose the reader toward the company, institution, or organization that sponsors the ad. Frequently the company's product line is not even mentioned, and even the company's name or logo often is placed inconspicuously in the ad, which often has much more copy than consumer-product ads. Institutional ads strive to project a good company image, or, by discussing some non-partisan issue, to convince the reader that a company is benevolent and public spirited. The people that run corporate America, it turns out, all wear white hats after all.

The assignment reads as follows:

> Assume you are working as an advertising copywriter for a Wilmington agency. The firm is bidding on a new account, and it is your job to come up with sample copy to submit to the client, Bulldozer Associates.
>
> Bulldozer Associates is a Dallas-based firm with investments in a broad range of companies and real estate developments. BA has recently bought a large tract of wooded land near the UNC-W campus. They plan to develop it as an industrial park and have already begun clear-cutting the trees, laying underground utility lines, putting in sewers, and paving roadways and large parking lots. BA has already reached an agreement with

Canarsie Smelters, who will move their chemical plant here from New Jersey. The plant is expected to employ over 200 people, most of them locals. When in operation, the plant will emit a pungent purplish smoke. Several other manufacturing firms will also locate in the park.

The land for the park was rezoned from residential to industrial over the angry objections of homeowners whose houses will adjoin the site. There have also been rumors that the developers bribed certain zoning officials, but no formal charges or legal actions have been brought; and there were complaints about the bigh tax breaks offered to both BA and the new industries to get them to locate in the park.

BA is looking for a series of ads to be run in the Wilmington press, designed to win the public's good will. Your job in landing the account is to:

1. compose a sample 8 1/2 by 11 inch ad whose purpose is to create a favorable image for the developers and to overcome negative public feelings toward the industrial park. The ad should consist of one or more headlines and accompanying copy; BA does not want any pictures.

2. explain to BA the way your ad will work. Specifically, explain the goals you set out to achieve with this ad, and the nature of the techniques and appeals you have used. In other words, tell your BA contact why this is a good ad for BA. Write this as a

memo or letter, remembering that your BA contact is a businessman and so is not familiar with semantic terminology (3).

I ask for an ad of about fifty to one hundred words and a two-to-three page (typewritten) explanation. As part of the prewriting and discussion activities, I bring for in-class analysis varied examples of institutional ads to supplement one in our textbook. I also duplicate an ad and explanation submitted in a previous semester and distribute them to class members; and, from time to time while they are working on the assignment, I show them or quote other examples that have been turned in in the past.

Students usually enter into the assignment (and the whole unit, for that matter) with enthusiasm, perhaps because it focuses on language phenomena that are a part of their own everyday lives and because it gives them a chance to use their own imagination to role-play and to create language, rather than only analyzing or reporting on someone else's. It also provides them with a self-generated example of how language can be dishonest, or at least ethically questionable, because the assignment in effect challenges them to make the indefensible not only defensible, but even appear to be beneficial. Thus the ads will talk about how "up to" two hundred people will get jobs thanks to BA; about how much the folks at BA just want to be good neighbors; about how BA is going to "help" Wilmington, a town so justly proud of its historic past, by "paving the way to a better tomorrow;" about how fortunate Wilmington is to have been

selected for BA's "growth enhancement project;" about how Canarsie Smelters' air pollution control devices are "75% better." One ad even pointed out that the smelter's purple smoke is "the new color of progress."

I warn the students that although they may want to do a snow job on the public in their ad, they had better not try to do a similar snow job on the executive at Bulldozer Associates--that they should keep their explanation honest and accurate, even at the expense of revealing a cynical or patronizing attitude toward the people of Wilmington, but that they must not be too nakedly conspiratorial either. So the explanations that accompany the ads tend to be written in a different voice from that of the ad; and they often show not only the student's grasp of the nature and possibilities of advertising language but also an awareness, by example, of the subtle game that two people can play when they want to be clear, but not too explicit, about how they are cutting corners morally in their verbal dealings with third parties. For instance, one student's memo closed by pointing out that the ad's final line, "we just want to feel welcome,"

> adds a note of pathos which every human can respond to - we <u>all</u> want to feel welcome in a new area. . . .If it doesn't cost people anything they are normally quite respondent to giving help and we have played upon this aspect of human nature. We leave the impression that Bulldozer is just like any other new neighbor. Indeed, our ad creates a personality for Bulldozer - a friendly, down to earth company, not a concrete monster invading

the city.

The role-playing aspect of the assignment can even reinforce the importance of observing the conventions of spelling, punctuation, syntax, and the like: I point out to them that few businessmen are going to hire an advertiser who commits egregious writing errors in the company's ads or internal memos.

I also use a question on advertising language on the final examination in the course as a way of not only summing up that unit, but also re-emphasizing a basic principle of General Semantics that permeates the course: that is, the difference between what General Semantics calls the extensional and the intensional. The former (extensional) refers to the world "out there" as it is, or at least as we are able to perceive it; and the latter (intensional) refers to the mental ideas, images, and associations--whether accurate or, more often, inaccurate--that we have about the extensional world and on which we base our attitudes and behavior toward the extensional world and everything and everyone in it. General Semantics stresses the discrepancy between the extensional and the intensional, along with our need to be aware of the differences, and the importance of keeping our intensional world as nearly identical to the objective extensional reality as we can. It also stresses the psychological, historical, cultural, and linguistic factors that operate to inhibit such identification.

So the exam question consists of three ads, and the students are supposed to tell me which one is the most extensional, that is, which one gives the largest amount of empirically verifiable

information about the product; and which one is the least extensional, that is, the most intensional, the one that provides the smallest amount of empirically verifiable information, relying instead on affective connotation and the usual advertiser's ploys. They must analyze all three in their answer, placing them on a sort of scale from most extensional to least. In a recent exam, one ad, a description of an exercise bike that I found in the Sears catalog, was almost completely factual, containing concise descriptions of the size, weight, construction, and function of the device; another was an ad for a Buick automobile, which contained both verifiable technical details about engine displacement, wheelbase, etc., and glossy but meaningless weasel words about how it sails along the highroads of life and the car's "clean, classic lines;" and an almost totally intensional blurb from the label on a bottle of Pert shampoo that gushed about being "specially formulated" to leave hair "looking healthy" and full of "body," whatever that is.

I've been very happy with this unit of the course as I have developed it over the past several years, and it is a good one to end the course with because it usually perks up students who are growing jaded and weary as another long semester of college is drawing to its tension-filled end. I try to balance the technical content of the course with practical applications, which is easy to do because of the topical concerns of General Semantics itself, advertising language being only one of the phenomena with which the field concerns itself (others are the

language of racism, sexism, and politics). And by the time we have reached the end of this unit, students need no prompting from me to realize the wisdom of W. H. Auden's commandment that "Thou shalt not be on friendly terms / with guys in advertising firms.'

NOTES

(1) I found this "product" in Michael H. Geis, The Language of Advertising (Troy, MI: Academic Press, 1982).

(2) I believe I first discovered this "product" in an early edition of Language Awareness, ed. Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark (New York: St. Martin's).

(3) This assignment is based on one devised by my colleague Richard C. Veit in The Little Writing Book (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1982), pp. 100-103.

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